

Uses of the Internet in Tracing the Mysterious Donald C. Thompson

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In 2015, James Castellan, Ron van Dopperen and I wrote a book called *American Cinematographers and the Great War, 1914-1918*. How we ended up collaborating on this is a long story but for the moment, let me just say that Jim Castellan is located in Rose Valley Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia, Ron is in Utrecht, Netherlands, and I live in Baltimore. Ron had been working for some time on World War I photographers and had indeed done his master's thesis on them. Jim was especially interested in Oswald F. Schuette, who had collaborated with Wilbur H. Durborough, one of the photographers prominent in the book, and I got into this because Durborough's film, ignored and unrestored, had been lying sobbing itself to sleep for thirty years in a cold, dark vault in the Library of Congress at Dayton, Ohio and now in Culpeper, Virginia. Utrecht is some distance away from me, and Rose Valley is not, but I have seen very little of either of my colleagues face to face.

So, as might be expected, we concentrated on various areas of our interests. Jim for instance concentrated on Durborough. Ron has concentrated on Albert K. Dawson, and I concentrated on A. E. Wallace and to some degree, on Donald C. Thompson. This is not to say that we did not all collaborate, but there was an unspoken allocation of attention.

So I would like to concentrate for the moment on Donald C. Thompson. As many of you probably know, he was one of the most celebrated film cameramen in World War I, a media star of his time. He came from Topeka, Kansas, left early to become a photographer and cinematographer when the War broke out. He was cited in literally hundreds of articles in newspapers both in Kansas and elsewhere, was admired in print by several prominent war

correspondents and authors as well as Robert R. McCormick, editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, with whom he shot film in Russia.

There is a stack of newspaper articles about him written both at the time of the war by the Kansas press and later. He is often mentioned in E. Alexander Powell's *Fighting in Flanders*. He has been the subject of two recent excellent articles, the first being by David Mould, and then the second article written jointly by David Mould and Gerry Veeder. He was once described by journalist Charles Wheeler as "the last word in impertinence and gall when he landed on the shore of Europe and asked where the war was at."

Because my wife's family lived in Illinois (in the neighborhood, so to speak) and because it was essential to see what was in the Kansas State Archives, as well as the Library of Topeka and Shawnee County public library, and because I am essentially a lazy person and figured the research would be easy, I ended up making two trips there.

However, while Thompson should have been easy to research, with a thick file at both places, full of the many glowing articles mentioned above, his story presents many problems.

For instance, it was very difficult to say who his father was.

Donald C. Thompson was born in Topeka, Kansas on 19 January 1884 according to all reports, although the birth certificates do not go that far back in Shawnee County, Kansas. At times he said that he was the son of C. L. Thompson, one of the pioneer settlers on the Kansas prairie near the Delaware River. In 1865, C. L. Thompson had erected a corn mill on the site of an old Mormon settlement which was thereafter called Thompsonville. Donald Thompson, who was

proud to be from Kansas, probably told this story many times, at the time when his reputation as a war photographer was growing.

Unfortunately, the story is too good to be true since C. L. was married to someone else besides Donald's mother, and had children of his own. Other records including some of Donald's passport applications claim that his real father was Harry E. Thompson, born in Oxford, Ohio, occupation unknown. However, this was evidently not true either.

Donald's mother was named Sarah Alice, commonly known as "Essie." Thompson claimed that Sarah and Harry married around 1880. However no record exists of a marriage license for Sarah and Harry in Topeka. Sarah came from a large family called Conkling (and occasionally Conklin) that had come to Kansas from Butler, Ohio. There is a marriage license in the official records of Topeka for a union between Thomas A. Thompson and Sarah M. Conklin on 14 November 1880. There is something fishy about the license. The wedding was performed in Grantsville, Jefferson County, Kansas, but the license was recorded in Shawnee County. This is irregular. If the wedding was performed in Jefferson County between two citizens of Jefferson County, then the license should have been recorded in Jefferson County. In addition, there was no Sarah M. Conklin listed in Grantsville, Thompsonville or anywhere else in Kansas at the time, although there were plenty of listings for Sarah A. Conklin.

Thomas A. Thompson was elusive himself. There are records showing that he was born in Grayson, Carter County, Kentucky in 1851, was a doctor, that he lived in Grantsville in Jefferson County which is outside of Topeka, located in Shawnee County. Thomas attended and graduated from the Medical College at Cincinnati in 1875. He also had another wife, Susan, in

Kentucky who died in 1916. He evidently never lived in Topeka with Sarah. Later, he went back to Kentucky, but in the end returned to Topeka where he died in 1922. For many years, Sarah was listed in the Topeka City Director as "Sarah Thompson, widow of Thomas A. Thompson," even before Thomas died. But I could never find any real hard information on the relationship between Thompson's parents, only baffling and irritating clues.

I could also find nothing on Donald C. Thompson himself in his youth in Kansas. I saw no listing for schools or high schools, although he said he attended the Harrison School in Topeka.

Furthermore, as an enterprising young fellow, one would have assumed that Thompson would have gotten a few stories in the local newspaper before he left Kansas. I could find nothing.

The reason I am bringing this up is that it was Ron van Dopperen who figured these enigmas out just sitting at his computer in Utrecht. Ron found some key articles. The reason is that there is not much on Donald Thompson in Topeka was that he was not in Topeka. He spent most of his time in Chanute, Kansas, with his uncle, Cory E. Conklin and aunt, who were listed in the Chanute city directory. An article in the *Topeka Daily Capital* of 20 May 1918, which cited a recent article in the *Coffeyville Journal* of 18 May 1918 caught Ron's eye:

The writer of this disconnected story picked up a newspaper the other day and saw the advertisement for a "movie" house in southern Kansas that is going to exhibit the pictures taken in war-torn Russia during the revolution and on the battle front by a Kansas boy, Donald Thompson. Topeka is forever chestily proclaiming that the world's most famous war photographer belongs to that town. And perhaps he prefers to hail from there as it is the home of his mother and has been for the last many years of his wanderings up and down the face of this troubled earth. But there was a time when Don Thompson was still in knee trousers, when he was far from glory and from fame, and the world's bloodiest history was practically undreamed of in this country, that he lived "across the alley" in Chanute. In those days he wasn't any brighter or any smarter

than the average small fry of the neighborhood. The germs of his genius might have lurked under his little hide in those days, but they gave no sign. Unless the fact that he and a small neighbor girl rigged up a toy printing press in the local coal shed and issued by fits and starts a voluminous periodical that they sold around the neighborhood for pins. Also they did job work for the juvenile shows and charged a good price for the same.

Then Don Thompson moved away, faded off the screen, and the coal shed that had harbored the primitive printing press and the embryo photographic genius and war hero knew him no more. For fifteen years little freckle-faced shock-headed Don Thompson was hardly a memory....

Then after a short resume of his career abroad, the article ends, "He's the same live wire today that he was fifteen or more years ago when he did a thriving business at a good pin profit, just across the alley."ⁱ The article was by the poet Esther M. Clark, later better known as Esther M. Clark Hill who wrote "The Call of Kansas," much loved by Kansans.

Ron also found another key piece of information, a notice of the decree of divorce awarded to Thomas A. Thompson and Sarah Alice in 1914, far after the probable dates of separation that I had researched on site, citing desertion for twenty years as grounds, suggesting that Thomas left when Donald was very young.ⁱⁱ This does a lot to explain why Donald Thompson was in Chanute, because if Donald Thompson was a bit of a problem child with no father around, it would be logical to ship him out to a more settled and complete family.

And the main point I want to stress is that Ron figured this out in Driebergen in the province of Utrecht in the Netherlands. I mean *Think about that*. It is miraculous enough that scholars around the world have access via ProQuest to the major newspapers in the United States, such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*. By the use of Newspaper Archive.com and Newspapers.com, which access hundreds of small-town newspapers, Ron was able to read old

newspapers from Chanute and Coffeyville, Kansas. Coffeyville had been the site of the shootout with the Dalton gang when Thompson was about six years old.

In addition to the local newspapers, websites, Ancestry .com was invaluable in solving puzzles about Thompson. Since it contains not only family histories and census records, but also city directories, military records and in the case of Donald Thompson, federal penitentiary records, there is a wealth of information. Since the Federal Government still keeps many of these records, they still can be retrieved virtually at cost.

The authors do not add this information because of their great passion either for genealogy or scandal, but because the record shows that from the beginning, Donald Thompson (and perhaps his family before him) constructed his life and his history as he went along. In a letter to Ron van Dopperen dated 9 September 1991, Serbian film historian Dejan Kosanovic of Belgrade was the first to describe him as “...a little mythomaniac.” [FIG. 26]

In fact he was a lot mythomaniac, and his mythomania was essentially the cause of his success. He could – and did – say almost anything to the press, or for that matter, to anyone. As a shining example, Thompson claimed he made the first war films in motion picture history while on a roving assignment to Europe during the first Balkan War in Turkey. In reality he had probably never left the country then and remained in Topeka, Kansas. He loved semi-military costumes, and claimed to have been an officer in the Nebraska National Guard. The Guard, again courtesy of the Internet, has put on file a record of all the soldiers in the Guard. There is no record of Thompson’s ever having been in the Nebraska National Guard. Indeed, one cannot see how he could have been an officer since he had been convicted of a felony. His

remarkable appearance was also part of the same flamboyant persona. He was more than an ordinary photographer: not only was he adept at selling his films but also - if one may put it this way - himself. The presentation of a news item is in itself a part of selling the film. In Thompson's case, it went much further. He used his natural tendency to heighten his self-esteem to help him appear as a star photographer. And the public, watching the rise of cinema celebrities such as Chaplin, seemed to have relished the exhibition. As the war started, America needed heroes. Thompson became one, and not one newspaper ever appears to have questioned the veracity of his tales. He was to tell such tall tales for the rest of his career.

The book that Jim, Ron and I wrote featured numerous acknowledgments ranging from private individuals with a few family clippings in the attic to prestigious institutions both in the United States and abroad. But the authors considered seriously an acknowledgement to the Internet itself.

Without the internet there is no way that this book could have been completed, at least not without using up the lives as well as the sanity of the authors. Consider: the scrap book of photographs belonging to one cinematographer showed up for sale at an online auction in upstate New York. What would have been the authors' chance of finding that in 1950? With eBay and Antiques online, it becomes easy to surf names. Just surfing at random pays off enormously. A number of missing shots from a film showed up online in a random compilation. The number on the leader of the reel was recognized as coming from the National Archives. Others films were found up at stock shot libraries, many of which now have their holdings, or at

least some of them, available online, while missing shots from another showed up both at the Imperial War Museum, and the Austrian film Archive.

Also on line in some cases, unidentified stills from these films have been found in photographic archives, both commercial and non-commercial, and there is much, much more. In the case of Thompson, the Prints and Photograph Division has a large number of original prints of the Russian women's "Legion of Death" which a strongly suspect are by Thompson, but are unidentified. Woman's Studies Historians please note. .

As a lasting legacy, World War I has also produced an historical film record that was used in various ways by military cinematographers, newsreel companies and newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*. It is safe to state that many of these contemporary war films have been lost over the years. In contrast to drama films, documentaries or newsreels did not represent valuable merchandise. Thus soon after the war ended many of these films were either destroyed or the nitrate stock slowly deteriorated in a dusty corner of an archive or private film collection. Film historian Jay Leyda wrote a short book, *Films Beget Films*, and lists the huge number of compilation films that were recycling World War I footage by the 1920's, if not earlier. He laments the destruction of this film heritage, reporting: "Within the next years [mid-1920's] it was common to see regular ads in *The Film Daily* offering 'over 5,000,000 feet of negatives and positives – scenes of every conceivable description,' or more simply 'A MILLION FEET OF EVERYTHING.' One sales line with implications was 'We buy Junk Film, guarantee no piracy.'ⁱⁱⁱ This happened in the United States as well as Europe. The fact that nitrate films are highly flammable also didn't help to preserve these historical World War I movies.

On the other hand, this recycling has helped preserve the World War I film that is left. The documentary film preserved usually has been the result of television productions such as the classic BBC *The Great War* series (1964). Since 1918, footage from film libraries and stock collections has been edited and recycled for these purposes in a way that represents a giant jigsaw puzzle. The authors have been fortunate enough to reconstruct some of these impressive scenes and identify the original war films these motion pictures came from. However, because many films are not properly inventoried, research on original World War I films continues to be a complicated if highly exciting challenge.

An example of the power of the internet on World War I research: The John E. Allen Collection, National Archives and the Library of Congress have parts of a film entitled “France in Arms,” distributed by Pathe Exchange in the United States in 1917. Some of this footage from NARA has been put on line by a commercial stock shot library. A comparison with material located at Ecpad (www.ecpad.fr), which is compiling a complete archive of French World War I footage, shows that the French title of the film is *La puissance militaire de la France* shot by the cinematic division of the French Army (SAC 582). All this filmed material was on line: no trip to the Library of Congress, the National Archives or any French film archive was necessary.

In line with the accessibility of much of this film material via the internet for the first time, the authors would like to endorse heartily the idea proposed several years ago by several European archives, that all of the archives put all of their World War I material on line. Otherwise, no one will ever know how much of this wonderful, invaluable material is in fact lost. If nothing else has been shown by the author’s project, it is that less of this material has been lost than

originally conceived. It has simply been recycled, and it is the internet that has shown us this, and it can do much, much more.

ⁱ *Topeka Daily State Journal*, 20 May 1918, p. 8, reprinted from *Coffeyville Journal*, 18 May 1918, 8. This is an excellent example of how small town newspapers' local events columns often act as an invaluable source of back-yard fence type gossip.

ⁱⁱ "Four Divorces Granted in Topeka Today," *Topeka Daily Capital* 18 January 1914, p. 7B. The office of Wills in Topeka stated that the relevant microfilm is damaged, and the Office could not send a copy of the final decree of divorce.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jay Leyda, *Films Beget Films: A Study of the Compilation Film*: London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1964; New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), 32-33.